The Charlestown Convent Riot of 1834:

An American Identity Crisis

A Thesis for Presentation to the United States Naval Academy

History Honors Board

By

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On the night of August 11, 1834, a large crowd gathered outside the Ursuline Convent on Mount Benedict in Charlestown, Massachusetts. A few days earlier one of the nuns, Sister Mary John, a converted Protestant, suffered a nervous breakdown due to her stressful work, and wandered into a neighboring house. There some friends of the convent cared for her, and she regained her health. Although she returned to the convent on her own volition, rumors of alleged brutal mistreatment of Sister Mary John circulated throughout the Boston area in the days that followed. After a meeting with the Charlestown selectmen on the afternoon of August 11, the Mother Superior thought that these rumors had been quelled. However, after being awaken by the cries of "Down with the convent,"[1] the Mother Superior immediately confronted the mob to find out exactly what they wanted. When she inquired if the town's selectmen had eased their fears of mistreatment of the missing sister, they replied that it was Selectman Runey who had unlocked the exterior gates to the convent.[2] Eager to save her defenseless students and nuns from the mob, she was forced to issue an empty threat. "Disperse immediately," she cried, "for if you don't, the bishop has twenty thousand Irishmen at his command in Boston, and they will whip you into the sea."[3]

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[1] Louise Goddard Whitney, *The Burning of the Convent* in Mass Violence in America (New York, Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), p. 80. While Ms. Whitney's account is generally regarded by many historians as highly inaccurate, the selections used here are also recorded in other primary sources. See Report of the Committee, Relating to the Destruction of the Ursuline Convent, August 11, 1842.

[2] *The Ursuline Convent* from *Mrs. Hale's Magazine* in An Account of the Conflagration of the Ursuline Convent, (Boston, Marsh, 1842), p. 30. An Account provides several key newspaper articles, reports, letters and Convent documents all relating to the riot.

[3] Whitney, *The Burning of the Convent*, p. 86.

The crowd did retire for some time, but they soon lit a signal fire, revealing that "their malicious purpose was not abandoned."[4] Led by "American truckmen and mechanics"[5], the crowd reassembled and then fired back with fierce shouts and threats of their own. A Charlestown fire company, trying to reach the besieged convent, was turned back by the mob. Soon after the fire company failed to breach the crowd, violence erupted. A group of nearly fifty men, appartently members of the working class, broke down the doors of the large stone building, torches in hand. The nuns then led the frightened girls, who were mostly the daughters of rich Protestant men, to safety outside the convent walls, as the rioters ransacked the basement "probably looking for those dungeons and cells of which they had heard."[6] They then moved upstairs where they continued to loot and set the building on fire. When they were finished, the great stone building, which dominated the heights over Charlestown, was a complete ruin.

For years after the riot, the ruins of the convent remained on Mount Benedict, a symbol of intolerance in Boston society. While this was not the first, and certainly not the last example of the violence erupting from social, religious, and economic antagonisms in American society, it was certainly one of the most visible. But it is not the significant attention that this incident drew which has intrigued historians; but rather the multitude of factors that have been used to explain the blatant *coup de force* against a completely defenseless convent which served as a school for the daughters of some of the richest and most prominent men of Boston society. Gender, religion, ethnicity, class conflict,

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[4] *The Ursuline Convent* in *Mrs. Hale's Magazine*, p. 30.
[5] Whitney, *The Burning of the Convent*, p. 87.
[6] Whitney, *The Burning of the Convent*, p. 101.

xenophobia, politics and economics have all been consistently, and often separately, used to explain the actions of those few men who actually did the looting and the burning.

Almost all historians who have analyzed this riot have recognized that, as in most historic events, no singular cause can be used to describe what transpired and why. Nevertheless, they have often emphasized one explanation over another, sometimes in an attempt to describe larger movements within American society. While some of their reasoning produced interesting insights into the motivation of the mob, they often have applied data and evidence which are not contemporary to the 1830's. Others have used the incident as evidence of larger economic, political, and social problems that Boston and the nation were confronting at the time. Rather than analyzing what the riot *per se* meant, it is used to explain a particular social or economic trend within society. Few have attempted to tie all the factors together to provide a thorough explanation of why this tragic incident occurred.

Taken as a whole, the various factors which contributed to the riot can be viewed as an attempt to protect Boston society from an unfamiliar and unwelcome institution. Bostonians at the time, and most Americans for that matter, had nothing to clearly identify themselves as a nation. Their institutions were still largely untried, and changing economic realities shifted the roles and expectations of workingmen, creating resentment among the lower classes. Increasing numbers of immigrants disrupted the traditional ethnic identity of Yankee society. Some historians have even concluded that celibate women living in the secluded convent challenged traditional models of masculinity. As Michael Chevailer, a visitor to the United States, remarked, the United States was "a body not yet in a state of consistency; it has no definable character, no fixed destination,

it is incapable of anything great."[7] Thus the Ursuline Convent, looming large over the city, provided a symbolic focus for their frustrations. The values to which those in the mob held firmly were a compilation of religious, ethnic, and economic insecurity in a city which was rapidly changing. The search for a common identity led many native born Americans to denounce violently people and institutions whom they could readily portray as un-American. Thus, the identity crisis caused by a diverse society existing within a new and fledgling nation was the overarching reason which unifies several divergent causes of the riot.

Many historians have commented on this search for an American identity during the years of the early republic. In his essay entitled *Nationalism and the American Identity in the Early Republic*, Clinton Rossiter concludes that Americans by 1861 had found common ground on which they could be united. Without this sentiment, he goes on to claim, the North could have never pulled together to fight the secessionist South. The antebellum years, he states, were "an industrious search for self-identity."[8] Rossiter fully accepts the view of Washington Irving in 1832 that America was indeed "a country where all is life and animation; where I hear on every side the sound of exultation; where everyone speaks of the past with triumph; the present with delight; and the future with glowing and confident anticipation."[9] Rossiter's rosy outlook concludes that Americans were in large part successful in their quest for self-identification as a new nation. While America was certainly searching for an identity during these times, the Charlestown

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[7] Michael Chevalier, Society, Manners and Politics in the United States (Boston:1839), p.123 as cited in Dale T. Knobel, Paddy and the Republic, p. 47.
[8] Clinton L. Rossiter, *Nationalism and American Identity in the Early Republic* in Major Problems of the Early Republic, 1787-1848, (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath, 1992), p. 14.
[9] Rossiter, *Nationalism and American Identity*, p. 17.

convent riot reveals that the search was incomplete and that citizens often resorted to excluding some groups of Americans in order to incorporate others. The various tensions which caused the riot demonstrate that Americans often sought to define themselves by attacking people and institutions which they saw as the antithesis of their national consciousness.

The most obvious friction expressed in the riot was a renewal of the Protestant-Catholic conflict on American shores. Boston had been from its inception a "city on a hill" and was still, by the 1830's, strongly associated with Protestantism. Part of the antagonism came from the traditional rhetoric which separated the two religions, but there was also a new fear which arose among Protestants. While Protestants were often brought up on a "steady diet of anti-Catholicism,"[10] the message of the attacks was changing. No longer were Catholics described as depraved souls and idol worshipers, they were now associated with a Papal plot to subvert the new and fledgling republic. This, combined with a second awakening of Protestant religion in the early 1830's, produced a hostile climate towards Catholic institutions, and the convent became the largest and most symbolic of these.

The fear of a papal takeover was not the only motivation for Protestant reprisal. Catholicism, because it was not a traditional part of Anglo-American culture, was often associated with unwanted foreign influence. In the 1830's immigration increased sharply, and the impoverished men and women stepping off the ships in Boston harbor were often easily clumped together as Catholics. A great many of these immigrants were the beginning of the Irish wave which would inundate American in the coming decades. To

[10] Thomas M. O'Connor, The Boston Irish: A Political History (Boston: Northeastern Press, 1995), p. 43.

Americans, particularly the lower class, the danger posed by these poor wretches stepping off the boat was apparent. The economy was beginning its transformation into the industrial age, and the local guilds and artisans were being replaced with an increasingly unskilled workforce. As their numbers increased, the Yankee lower class became increasingly fearful of the immigrants with "the brogue on their lips and the mud on their boots."[11] The religion of the new immigrants thus offered a convenient outlet for the rage of the workingman against their new rivals, the Irish immigrant.

Another factor which entered into the equation was the peculiar institution of the convent itself and its conflict with the values of the surrounding society. Many found the secretive convent, with its company of single, independent women as "highly injurious to the great interests of the community."[12] The unique atmosphere of the convent was an anomaly in the sea of Protestant revival throughout New England. Wild rumors circulated around the community about sexual indiscretions amongst the clergy and the nuns. The fact that three-fourths of the students were Protestants led some to believe that the children were being held against their will and forced to participate in Catholic rituals which were said to include infanticide. [13] Some historians have concluded that the convent proved a convenient outlet for the mob to vent their ethnic and economic frustration, but the men who burned it down also saw their actions as a "vindication of violated gender norms."[14]

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[11] O'Connor, The Boston Irish, p. 48.
[12] *A Letter to the Editor of the Boston Recorder* in An Account of the Conflagration of the Ursuline Convent, August 11, 1834, (Boston: Marsh, 1842), p. 18.

[13]Daniel A. Cohen, "Miss Reed and the Superiors: The Contradictions of Convent Life in Antebellum America", *The Journal of Social History*, 20, 1996-1997, 163.
[14] Cohen, "Miss Reed and the Superiors", 163.

These motives combined to create a torrent of hatred which led to the events of that horrible night. Spurred on by newspapers and sermons on the evils perpetrated inside the convent, working class men unleashed their frustrations. While the men in the crowd that night bear the brunt of the guilt for what happened, their actions were, to some extent, incited, if not even openly condoned, by the leaders of Boston society. Yet the overarching theme which encompasses this wide variety of historical explanations is the search on the part of many Americans for an identity. The general contempt for the Ursulines was fostered by a lack of confidence among many levels of Boston society which subsequently resulted in an attack on an institution which could easily be identified as alien and unwelcome.

Protecting the "City on a Hill"

On the day following the riot, the mayor called a city meeting which included some of Boston's foremost citizens. In a united voice they called the burning of the convent a "base and cowardly act, for which the perpetrators deserve the contempt and detestation of the community."[15] But in assigning full responsibility to those who lit the fires they ignored the sentiments, attitudes and prejudices which contributed to the riot. The increased presence of Catholics in Boston accelerated fears of papal plots to subvert the new republic. This combined with a Protestant spiritual revival in the first half of the 1830's which awakened harsh prejudices traditionally held towards Catholics in both subtle and obvious ways. Protestants, who often viewed Catholics as idol-worshipers who

[15] *The Boston Daily Advertiser,* August 13, 1834

blindly followed a theocratic dictator in Rome, felt that the ever-increasing number of Papists would subvert their values of republicanism, progress and reform.

The committee which met the morning following the riot included mainly wealthy Protestant men. Their duty was to express their abhorrence at this "high-handed violation of the laws" and to "unite with our Catholic brethren in protecting their persons, their property, and their civil and religious rights."[16] A Boston historian, Justin Winston, would attest that "the citizens of Boston of the better class were filled with indignation at this dastardly outrage on defenseless women and children."[17] The committee even offered a "very liberal reward"[18] to anyone who came forward to help solve the case. While this was a clear and unequivocal renunciation of the actions of the men the previous night, it masked the reality of Catholic-Protestant relations in contemporary Boston. The reality was that many Protestants, including those in the upper echelons of society, deeply resented the rapidly growing Catholic community. Even though almost any "candid, respectable man" deplored the burning of the convent, many insisted the "such institutions are anti-Christian, anti republican… and to be strenuously, perseveringly, and unitedly opposed by all intelligently patriotic and humane people of every Christian denomination."[19] Considering the popularity of preachers like Lyman Beecher, in whose sermons " 'the devil and Pope in Rome' were never introduced

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[16] *The Boston Daily Advertiser*, August 13, 1834
[17] Justin Winsor, The Memorial History of Boston, (Boston: Osgood, 1881), p.524
[18] *A Proclamation by his Excellency*, John Davis, *Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, 15 August, 1834
[19] Letter to the Editor of the *Boston Recorder August 15*, 1834, in An Account of the Conflagration of the Ursuline Convent, p. 18.

without the other"[20], clearly the scourge of anti-Catholicism was not isolated to a few zealots, but rather represented widespread prejudice.

Anti-Catholic resentment was nothing new to Boston, and, if fact, it flourished during the Colonial Period. Every November 5, the Protestants of Boston would run wild through the streets of Boston, "bearing effigies of the Pope and the Devil, shooting firecrackers, and demanding money from householders."[21] For diplomatic reasons, the holiday was suppressed after 1775, and the war effort deflected attention from Catholics. But this resentment did not disappear, but merely lay dormant. After the war, Bishop Carroll visited Boston and noticed that:

> "Many here, even of their principle people, have acknowledged to me that they would have crossed to the opposite side of the street rather than meet a Roman Catholic. The horror which was associated with the idea of a Papist is incredible; and the scandalous misrepresentations by the ministers increased the horror every Sunday."[22]

The growth of these sentiments can be in part attributed to the growth of the Church in both America and Boston. Boston had had a strong Protestant identity since its founding by Puritans as John Winthrop's "city on a hill." In the decade after the revolution, there were perhaps a hundred Catholics in Boston, with no church, organization or regular place of worship. The establishment of Boston as a "Holy See" in 1810 led to some resentment, as Protestants eagerly pointed out that Boston was now a

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[20] Whitney, *The Burning of the Convent*, 19.
[21] Ray Billington, The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860, (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964), 18.
[22] Thomas O'Gorman, History of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1895), p. 277.

province of the Vatican. Nevertheless, Boston remained free of violence between Catholics and Protestants. This fact has led some historians, most notably Oscar Handlin, to conclude that antagonism towards Catholics came only as a result of unwanted foreigners, and in particular the Irish. In this modern interpretation, the impact of religious conflict is downplayed, and the idea of Catholic-Protestant violence is thought inconceivable.[23] By the 1830's, with much insecurity about the future of the nation, Catholicism, no matter what its origin, was seen as a legitimate threat to American society.

The growth of the church in Boston during the decades preceding the riot accentuated this fear. Protestants had been "trained from birth to hate Catholicism" and school books often "breathed a spirit of intolerance."[24] Nevertheless, cooperation between many upper class Protestants and the Catholic Church existed. When a committee was formed to raise funds for the building of Boston's first Catholic Church, at the head of the subscription list was the most prominent Bostonian of the time, John Adams, President of the United States.[25] But the ever-increasing presence of Catholicism led many to believe that their worst fears were being affirmed. Along with the Pope making Boston an Episcopal See in 1808, the first bishop, Bishop Cheverus, came to Boston from Baltimore in 1810. The Ursuline Convent was established in 1820, and moved to their new home on Mount Benedict in 1826. The first church was built in Charlestown just 3 years later to accommodate the "little colonies of Catholic

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[23] Oscar Handlin Boston's Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1959), pp. 178-190.
[24] Billington, The Protestant Crusade, p. 345.
[25] Winsor, The Memorial History of Boston, p. 517.

settlements"[26] just over the bridge to Boston. The number of Catholics living in Boston increased from 2,120 in 1820 to nearly 7000 by 1830, a growth from about five to ten percent of the population. In 1830, there were nearly 14,000 Catholics in New England, served by sixteen churches.[27] By 1834, the Catholic Church, under the leadership of Bishop Fenwick, had greatly increased its power and prestige in Boston, to the dismay of Protestants of all economic classes.

The convent provided an easy target for Anti-Catholic extremists. Resentment had existed ever since the Ursulines had moved into their residence in 1826, but they had carried on with their teachings without much disturbance. In the school were 54 girls, most from rich Protestant families, and ten sisters who were charged with overseeing them. Further religious tensions rose in Charlestown when the Archdiocese of Boston decided to use a plot of land on the city grounds to build a Catholic Cemetery. The Selectmen immediately opposed this, and went to the State Legislature requesting that towns be permitted to deny burying rights. Undeterred, Bishop Fenwick undertook the burial of children on the new cemetery's grounds.[28] While the case was still in litigation, another episode, the disappearance of Sister Mary John, inflamed religious tensions in Boston to a boiling point. But the hatred which flared that summer did not spring suddenly from nowhere. Rather, it had its roots in the fervent anti-Catholic feelings which had accumulated over decades.

To Protestants, Catholics represented the antithesis of their value system. Rather than the optimistic and rational world which Americans perceived, Catholics took a more

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[26] Winsor, The Memorial History of Boston, 519.
[27] O'Gorman, History of the Roman Catholic Church, pp.291-293.
[28] Winsor, The Memorial History of Boston, 522.

humble and pessimistic approach to life. America was founded and sustained with a spirit of innovation and progress, while the Church often preached against undue worldliness and faith in a system which rational American Protestants could not understand. The values of the natives of Boston embraced "rationalism, a faith in progress, and the possibility of reform."[29] Catholicism held that the misery of the world was a prelude to the joy of the next. And it was this promise of eternal happiness that Catholics used to justify their strong ties to their Church. Catholics thus represented a distinct threat to the values of Bostonians, and to counter this threat, Protestants often turned to the Constitutional concepts of freedom of speech and expression.[30]

In the years following the revolution, Protestant radicals circulated pamphlets and books spewing anti-Catholic rhetoric. These did not receive much attention until Catholicism began to increase its presence in the United States. By 1827, over thirty religious newspapers circulated throughout the East Coast of the United States. While they were not entirely devoted to the cause of defeating "popery", they nevertheless made a deep impression upon the Protestant community. The Boston *Recorder,* established in 1816, carried the banner of "No-Popery" in New England. It extolled the "idolatry" and "corruption"[31] of the Church and continued publishing anti-Catholic articles until the time of the riot. Perhaps the greatest measure of how influential these newspapers were becoming is the extent to which the Catholic Church felt it necessary to defend itself from their vicious attacks. By 1829, the Baltimore Provincial Council felt it necessary to state that:

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[29] Wilfred Joseph Bisson, Some Conditions for Collective Violence: The Charlestown Convent Riot of 1834, (Lansing: Michigan State University, 1974), p. 46.
[30] Billington, The Protestant Crusade, p. 70.
[31] O'Connor, The Boston Irish, p. 44.

> "Not only do they assail us and our institutions in a style of vituperation and offense, misrepresent our tenets, vilify our practices, repeat the hundred-times-refuted calumnies of the days of angry and bitter contention in other lands, but they have even denounced you and us as enemies to the liberties of the republic, and have openly proclaimed the fancied necessity of obstructing our progress, and of using their best efforts to expiate our religion."[32]

Clearly these papers were beginning to make their presence felt well before the riot, but Catholics, with their growing numbers, also had their methods of response. Initially, the Catholic community responded with the same sort of propaganda which the Protestants had been perfecting for years. But this "polemic rather than apologetic approach"[33] served only to distance Catholics further from Protestants.

The anti-Catholic audience grew to the point that some clergymen in New York were able to found a paper, known as the *Protestant*, based solely on the purpose of promoting such intolerance. The editors of this paper proudly proclaimed that the goals of their publication were to "inculcate Gospel doctrine against Romanish corruptions- to maintain the sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures against monkish traditions…and to defend the revealed truth." [34] To clarify the purpose of the paper, the editors added that "no article will be admitted into the Protestant which does not contribute to these desirable goals."[35] But despite the popularity of the occasional anti-Popery article in the

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[32] *The Baltimore Provincial Council of 1829*, as cited in Billington, The Protestant Crusade, p.45.
[33] Winsor, The Memorial History of Boston, p.521.
[34] *The Massachusetts Yeoman*, December 19, 1929. This quotation was found in a prospectus of the *Protestant*.
[35] *The Massachusetts Yeoman*, December 19,1929

daily newspapers, the extremely conservative *Protestant* failed to catch much popular appeal. Even when they broke their pledge of keeping the publication a totally anti-Catholic enterprise, subscriptions continued to fall.[36] Only when the ownership of the *Protestant* changed and it was made a monthly magazine did it become more popular, although it never relented on its purpose of exposing Catholicism as "soul-corrupting, soul destroying influence" and "dreading the danger to which our country… is exposed."[37] Despite its rocky start, *Protestant Magazine* was so successful by 1834 that it nearly spawned a new anti-Catholic newspaper that same year. The limited success of such publications demonstrate that there was at least a moderate interest in the cause of Protestant radicalism in the Northeast preceding the riot.

Writing, however, was not the only means used to spread religious resentment during this period. At the head of an intense spiritual revival, zealous preachers such as Lyman Beecher and Samuel Morse, saw the increasing population of Catholics as a threat to American republicanism. In order to stop the "leak in the ship through which the muddy waters without threaten to sink us,"[38] Morse advocated that Protestants oppose Catholic immigration and Catholic schools. In the autumn of 1834 he published "A Foreign Conspiracy against the Liberties of the United States" which outlined a Papist plot to subjugate the United States.[39] Fast on Morse's heels was Lyman Beecher, who gave three "thunderous anti-Catholic"[40] sermons to packed churches in Boston. While a direct correlation between the riot and these speeches cannot be made, they nevertheless

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[36] Billington, The Protestant Crusade, p.55
[37] *Protestant Magazine* I, September, 1833
[38] Samuel Morse, "Foreign Conspiracies against the Liberties of the United States" (New York: 4th Edition), 15
[39] Billington, The Protestant Crusade, p. 123
[40] O'Connor, The Boston Irish, 46

illustrate the deep hold that fear of Catholicism had taken on the population. This fear had been perpetuated by men of the upper classes, the same class of men who would meet the day after the riot to state their outrage.

Some historians, such as Oscar Handlin, have downplayed the role of genuine anti-Catholicism, arguing instead that such religious antipathy was a result of other social and economic frustrations.[41] While these economic and social factors did contribute towards the general ambivalence towards the convent, the high volume and receptiveness of anti-Catholic literature and speeches points towards a genuine resentment of Catholicism. The newspaper campaign which began years before the riot set the tone for what transpired that August night. As Justin Winsor states, there existed a great deal of ambivalence towards the Catholic Church long before the riot, and this hatred was not created, but rather magnified by the writings in the days and weeks leading up that fateful night.[42]

Even after August 11, the hatred of Catholics which preceded the riot was not entirely replaced with sympathy. Letters to the editors of the *Boston Courier* regularly insisted that what was taking place behind the convent was an attempt to subvert the values and beliefs of the Protestant girls. A steady complaint on the part of some Protestant readers was the issue of religious rituals in which these "daughters of pious parents"[43] were forced to partake. One man complained that four Protestant girls who attended a convent school in Montreal had their Protestant bibles taken from them and

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[41] Handlin, Boston's Immigrants, p. 184.
[42] Winsor, The Memorial History of Boston, pp. 515-546.
[43] *Letter to the Editor of the Boston Recorder*, as cited in An Account of the Conflagration of the Ursuline Convent, p. 18. This letter referred to the Hotel Dieu Nunnery, the same convent which Maria Monk would later write her infamous story.

"were required to attend Catholic worship exclusively."[44] These sentiments reflect a common view that the convents were the starting point for a Catholic plot in the United States. There was perhaps no other place in the nation where such hatred would resonate as Boston, the cradle of the Revolution.

The land which the convent occupied overlooked the historic battlefield of Bunker Hill. That land represented a proud chapter in the history of the young republic. But it was a history which was identified as Protestant in nature, and the building of a Catholic convent on such hallowed ground represented an infringement on that identity. By the time Sister Mary John disappeared on August 8th, anti-Catholic sentiments had been firmly entrenched in the mindset of the population. Upper-class members of society, while not immune from these sentiments, publicly denounced the actions of the men who burned the defenseless building. Yet it was many men from this class, the newspaper editors and prominent preachers, who spurred on the working class members of the mob. The men who burned the convent were, in part, motivated by a genuine hatred of the Catholic Church and the perceived threat it represented to their values. But religious animosity cannot entirely account for the range of social resentments which also contributed to the riot. The fact that these men were all from the same socio-economic group is not a coincidence, but rather points to another motivation behind the burning of the convent.

A Problem of Ethnicity

[44] An Account of the Conflagration of the Ursuline Convent, p. 18.

Despite the general anti-Catholic resentments in Boston during this period, religious antagonism can not alone account for violence of this magnitude. Even before the riot, numerous Protestant groups urged reconciliation with Catholics. Congregationalists encouraged their followers to bond in "the spirit of prayer and Christian love."[45] Many were quick to acknowledge that Christians, Catholics and Protestants alike "all equally hold that he came… to save us from sin and to publish a covenant of grace."[46] Even before the riot, the *Boston Courier* rebuked Reverend Beecher for his insidious comments. To dismiss the contributions of genuine anti-Catholicism in the convent riot would be to ignore a major factor in the violence perpetrated that night, but the anti-Catholic rhetoric spewing from so many sources was in part, a manifestation of other socio-economic friction in Boston society. The friction between Irish immigrants and American workers would be primarily responsible for the escalation to violence. It was only when the lower class workers' economic security and identity was threatened that the convent faced danger.

What certainly did not help the perception of Catholics in America was that they were increasingly coming from Ireland. Generally poor and literally dressed in rags when stepping on the pier, the Irish were a natural target for resentment. They represented the antithesis of American values, and were often portrayed by both the British and Americans as lazy and shiftless. They occupied the poorest sections of the city, where crime and debauchery were rampant. Their view of the world had been marked by a completely different environment than that of Americans. They did not share the same

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[45] *The Catholic Observer*, March 1, 1848.
[46] Richard Price, *Sermons of the Christian Doctrine as Received by the Different Denominations of Christians*, as cited in Oscar Handlin, Boston's Immigrants, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap, 1959), p. 182.

optimism and faith in fairness as those native to the New World. Their experience had been shaped by desperate poverty, an oppressive foreign regime, and frequent tragedy. And while Irish migration in the 1830's had not reached the massive numbers that would occur during the Great Famine of 1846 to 1851, they were nevertheless beginning to make a dent in the national demographics and economics.

Historians, however, have often misinterpreted what the "Irish factor" meant in the motivation behind the burning of the convent. Oscar Handlin, for instance, makes the mistake of using late 19th Century evidence of prejudice against the Irish and applies it to the time of the convent.[47] In particular, it has been argued that Irish political power was a source of growing resentment among all classes of Yankee society.[48] Yet in 1834 there were only 200 registered voters of Irish decent in Boston, and no Irish candidates elected to a major office.[49] The years of Tammany Hall and legendary Irish politicians was decades away; in fact Boston would not elect an Irish mayor for another fifty years. Resentments of Irish political power would come later, but the threat the Irish did pose to the established order in the 1830's was real and two-fold. First, they were perceived as "a race that will never be infused into our own, but on the contrary will always remain distinct and hostile."[50] Secondly, their apparent willingness to undercut wages of the increasing number of unskilled workers posed a threat to American workingmen.

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[47] Handlin, Boston's Immigrant's, p. 191.
[48] Irish politicians began increasing their power after the Civil War, as the famine immigrants began to create ethnic strongholds within Boston's ward system. For information of the Irish rise to political prominence in Boston, see to O'Connor, The Boston Irish:A Political History.
[49] *The Jesuit Sentinel*, January 18, 1834.
[50] Mayor Lyman, in *Inaugural Addresses by the Mayors of Boston.* (Boston: 1894), I, 195.

To understand the perceived Irish threat, it is necessary to understand the circumstances which caused them to migrate to the New World. Before the 1820's, most of the Irish in America consisted of Protestants from the northern counties of Ireland. But the following decades saw a dramatic increase in the number of Irish emigrating from the southern counties. By 1831, 2,361 people arrived in the port of Boston from Ireland, a four-fold increase from 1826. This number, however, understates the *actual* number of Irish arriving in Boston, since many immigrants went to Britain before their trans-Atlantic crossing.[51]For a nation that was mainly based on agricultural subsistence, it was becoming more and more difficult to feed the expanding population. The idea of emigration, once impossible to imagine, was becoming an increasingly attractive option.[52]

As they descended from rickety ships which had carried them across the Atlantic, they were further identifiable by their tattered clothes that had been out of style for a generation.[53] But it was not so much the physical appearance which Americans criticized as much as the "moral failings"[54] of the Irish people. They were often described as

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[51] *Table V: Passengers Entering Boston by Sea, 1821-1865*, as cited in Handlin, Boston's Immigrants, p. 242.

[52] Cormac O'Grada, The Great Irish Famine, (Cambridge: Gill and MacMillian, 1989), pp. 5-31.

[53] Cartoons were a familiar form of Irish bigotry all through the 19th Century. The ways in which they were depicted, however, changed as the century progressed and the threat the Irish presented to "traditional" American establishments grew. During this time, however the Irish were most often presented as an apish creature that was almost as funny as he was threatening. For examples, see Dale T. Knobel, Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America, (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1986).

[54] O'Connor, The Boston Irish, p. 45.

"lawless", "turbulent" and "rebellious."[55] The old English stereotype of the "Wild Irish" was transplanted onto American shores much to the detriment of Irish immigrants. Yet despite the existing stereotypes, the view which Americans held towards the Irish was, as Dale Knobel demonstrates, one of pity rather than outright animosity.

A school textbook of the time described the Irish as "quick of apprehension, active brave and hospitable, but passionate, ignorant, vain and superstitious."[56] This view, which is contemporary with the riot, held that the failings in the Irish did not lay in their genetics, but rather their upbringing. The authors of the time were far more willing to mix praise of the Irish with condemnation, unlike later years after resentment towards the Irish had increased substantially. It was during this time that the image of Patty, portrayed in magazines as a buffoon, began to appear. The desperate poverty and complete ignorance as to the workings of the modern world made them a comic character which was to be pitied rather than feared.[57]

What began to change this perception was the search on the part of Americans for a "national identity." Since America was a land of various competing interests, many leaders felt obligated to "authenticate themselves as 'Americans."[58] In order to accomplish this, it was necessary to identify what exactly an American was *not*. The Irish provided a perfect example of the antithesis of the American ideal. There was no greater

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[55] Dale T. Knobel, Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America, (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), p. 47.
[56] Jesse Olney, A Practical System of Geography: (New York: 1928), p. 161 as cited in Knobel, Paddy and the Republic, p. 47.
[57] Knobel insists that before the years before the famine, when the Irish were still a relatively small faction with little political power, the Irish were looked upon as dangerous due to their ignorance, not their strength as a minority group. See Knobel, Paddy and the Republic, pp. 39-67.
[58] Wilfred Joseph Bisson, Some Conditions for Collective Violence: The Charlestown Convent Riot of 1834, (Lansing: Mishigan State Unversity Press, 1974), p. 51.

threat to American culture than "these hordes of vicious and ignorant vassals from Ireland, who pour upon us like the Goths upon Rome."[59] Their ignorance threatened the very foundation of the Republic, and persuaded many that action needed to be taken to prevent these "servile, uneducated, and unaccustomed to self-government"[60] Irish from ruining the still fledgling nation. While the Irish were seen as merely victims of the circumstances given to them, they nevertheless posed a threat to democracy and American ideals simply through that ignorance.

A Question of Money

Yet to the men who actually set fire to the convent, these prejudices might have seemed superfluous. These men represented the lower end of the economic ladder, and to them, the real competition from the Irish was not that of character, but to employment. As New England was shifting from an economy based on crafts to one centered on industry, the importance of unskilled labor grew. The old system of guilds formed on the bonds of a highly developed skill were fragmenting and reforming into the management- laborer relationship similar to the one we have today. This trend was clear in labor conflicts which hit Boston first in 1825 and then again in 1832. When house carpenters separated from the master carpenters in 1825, their efforts were squashed by the carpenters and

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[59] "Foreign Pauperism in the United States" in *New England Magazine,* 7 (December, 1834), p. 498.
[60] Knobel, Paddy and the Republic, p. 55.

merchants who wanted to keep control over the trade. In 1832, however, when ship carpenters went on strike, they had the support of organizations such as the New England organization of Farmers, Mechanics and Other Workingmen. The failure of their strike, and their continued frustration with the emerging model of management resulted in part from the threat of the master ship's carpenters to hire Irish strikebreakers. The willingness of the Irish to work for lower pay while American workers became unemployed infuriated many of the working class. Thus, the increasing competition for these jobs often led to a conflict between native workingmen and poor Irish immigrants. Continually frustrated with the Irish willingness to accept lower salaries, workingman's associations, forerunners to unions, were established and founded on both anti Irish and anti-Catholic principles.

One of the most vocal labor leaders at this time was Seth Luther, organizer of the New England Association of Farmers, Mechanics and Other Workingmen. Trying to unite the workingmen against the reduction of economic power they suffered in the new system of management, Luther railed against the Irish who came to the United States to "underwork Americans."[61] The rapid changes in the economy of the Northeast presented Boston with an increasing division between the working class and the upper echelons of society. "Who could have foretold," wrote Samuel Gridley Howe in 1834, "of such an early division among the people and a feeling of hostility between rich and poor?"[62] At, times, working-class Protestants confronted poor Irish-Catholics, venting their frustration

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[61] Seth Luther, Address to the Workingmen of New England, p. 12 as cited in Wilfred Joseph Bisson, Some Conditions for Collective Violence: The Charlestown Convent Riot of 1834, (Lansing: Michigan State University, 1974), p. 67.

[62] Samuel Gridley Howe, "Atheism in New England," *New England Magazine*, Vol. 7 (July- December, 1834), p. 501.

over the loss of their economic power. But these small-scale encounters hid the extent to which these animosities had become imbedded into workingmen's consciousness. Stricken by their lack of identity and lack of power within the new economy, the working men of Boston lashed out against the most identifiable institution of their economic adversaries: the Catholic convent on Mount Benedict.

The disappearance of Sister Mary John was the source of great consternation for much of the city. The day following her breakdown the *Boston Transcript* reported the "considerable excitement"[63] which surrounded the entire affair. Although workingmen of Boston would seize upon this opportunity to lash out against such a visible Catholic symbol, in the eyes of many workingmen, the Irish and the Catholic Church were inseparable. In response, it appears that a group of radical "Truckmen of Boston" conspired from the beginning to burn down the convent, and sent a vicious letter to the selectmen of Charlestown stating their intentions.[64] The letter demonstrates that before the riot, there was an element of the working class which was organized and ready to respond against any threat the convent represented. While none of those arrested for involvement in the riot described themselves as "truckmen", nevertheless, both the letter and the arrest record show that the violence perpetrated was a working class phenomenon.

All told, thirteen men would be arrested for their involvement in the riot. These thirteen men included three brickmakers, two shoemakers, two mariners, a carpenter,

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[63] *The Mercantile Journal*, August 9, 1834.
[64] *Letter from the Selectmen of Charlestown to the Public*, August 15, 1834. as cited in An Account of the Conflagration of the Charlestown of the Ursuline Convent, p. 19 . This message was posted across Charlestown on August 9, 1834.

gardener, painter, baker, ropemaker and laborer.[65] With the exception of the brickmakers and the laborer, all were members of a skilled guild, the group which perhaps most resented the Irish cheapening their craft. The determination which the rioters displayed came as an outgrowth of their search for an identity in a changing world. No longer could they reliably turn to their crafts and guilds as a source of distinction. They were increasingly forced to take jobs that were unskilled and where they could easily be replaced with the wretched Irish immigrant. With no reliable labor union to support them, these laborers turned to symbolic acts of violence to vent their frustrations at those from whom they distinguished themselves.

The convent provided a symbolic enemy of these working-class men. It represented the Church to which their fiercest economic rivals belonged. The men who lit the fires that night saw the Convent as a perfect opportunity to strike back against the most vulnerable symbol of their enemies and thereby reassert their lost identity.

The Issue of Masculinity

Convents had always been a "hallmark of anxiety about the Catholic Church."[66] Just one year following the convent fire, two books, Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery and Six months in a Convent, both of which presented ridiculous accusations of convent life, became best-sellers. Convents were new to the United States, the first one

[65] McCarthy, The Rescue of True Womanhood, p. 83.
[66] McCarthy, The Rescue of True Womanhood, p. 9.

being established in Maryland in 1790.[67] By 1820 there were 270 nuns in the United States and their numbers were growing. But despite their small numbers, they drew a disproportional interest from the protestant majority. Part of this interest lies simply in the fact that they were a highly visible example of Catholic monasticism which, by its very nature, was elusive and mysterious. Such seclusion spread the "widespread fear of concealment… as some Americans charged that secretive institutions threatened the tenants of republicanism."[68] As demonstrated earlier, there was no shortage of anxiety over the stability of the new republic. But it is also possible that convent life challenged traditional masculine identity.

Sexuality is a relatively new entry into the explanation of the riot. The foremost study comes from Maureen McCarthy's The Rescue of True Womanhood: Convents and Anti-Catholicism in 1830's America (1996). In her dissertation, McCarthy examines the "narrative of female captivity and male rescue… to better understand anti-Catholicism, and anti-bellum America itself."[69] Her analysis revolves around the belief that the Protestant men of Boston felt the women of the convent were held by an oppressive Catholic institution, bent on the corruption of their virtues. It was this widely held belief, McCarthy argues, that spurred the fury of the mob in 1834. Certainly there is an abundance of evidence, statistical and anecdotal, that would point to such a mentality. A different view of the sexual tensions arising from the convent, however, is that the Protestant men were not necessarily seeking to protect their women, but rather their identity as American Protestants.

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[67] McCarthy, The Rescue of True Womanhood, p. 10.
[68] McCarthy, The Rescue of True Womanhood, p. 7.
[69] McCarthy, The Rescue of True Womanhood, p. iii.

It is surprising that sexuality would remain dormant as an explanation considering the impact that it had on contemporary analysis. The two most popular insights into convent life, Awful Disclosures and Six Months in a Convent, were both harsh accounts which portrayed convent life as amoral. Six Months in a Convent was the story of Rebecca Reed, a sister who had "escaped" from the Mount Benedict Convent. In many ways her stories arose from the need of Protestant men to justify their actions. As the Catholic Herald stated that "since that disgraceful event its perpetrators and their abettors have been incessant in their efforts to persuade themselves and others of the wisdom and justice of their act."[70] As Maureen McCarthy points out, gender specific language had often been used to demonize the rioters. They were viewed as attacking "unoffending" and "defenseless" women. But another possible argument is that the rioters, and those who sought to defend their actions, used Rebecca Reed to demonstrate that the nuns were unwilling prisoners in an attempt by the Catholic Church to undermine the values of American society.

Reed had joined the convent in 1831 and left a few months later. Her position in the convent would later become a source of controversy, as promoters of her story would claim that she was a fully indoctrinated sister. The Mother superior and Bishop Fenwick would later insist that she had been admitted on a probationary period, at the end of which she left on her own volition. Rumors circulated around the city just prior to the riot about the bizarre world which lay within the walls of the convent. While Rebecca Reed's story did not appear in writing prior to the riot, the publication of her story afterwards provides insight into the rumors which circulated beforehand. In short, the novel (since it

[70] *The Catholic Herald* as cited in the *Protestant Vindicator*, September 21,1836.

certainly has no factual basis) deducts that she was a girl "ignorant about Catholicism," and persuaded to become a nun by her Irish servant girl.[71] It was only after a few months that she found the true intentions of the convent. Her indoctrination ceremony, headed by Bishop Fenwick, "sneered at Yankees" and she was even read letters from the Pope to the Bishop congratulating him on his success at expanding the Catholic Church.[72] This theme of the seduction and oppression of a naï ve girl to promote the agenda of Catholic expansion continues throughout the book, and it seems that the issue is not, as McCarthy claims, the justification of the rescue of women, but rather the rescue of American virtues.

This theme continues in the next convent novel, Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery, which was funded by a network of New York City publishers. The book, described the false atrocities inflicted upon a phony nun, Maria Monk, whose name subsequently became "as familiar as any political personage whose name is before the public."[73] Her story wove together "Gothic, sentimental, and melodramatic themes," and as McCarthy herself concludes, "uses one woman's experience in one Catholic institution to indict the entire Catholic Church."[74] In the convent, she was forced to engage in "criminal intercourse" with priests and was then told that this was not immoral due to the belief that priests were infallible. The nuns were also subjected to severe punishment, which included walking on their knees and eating meals with ropes tied around their

[71] McCarthy, The Rescue of True Womanhood, p. 124.
[72] Rebecca Reed, Six Months in a Convent, (Boston: Russell, Odiorne and Co., 1835), pp. 116-117.
[73] McCarthy, The Rescue of True Womanhood, p. 257.
[74] McCarthy, The Rescue of True Womanhood, p. 182.

necks.[75] And in perhaps the most horrible episode, she discovers a pit full of infant corpses which "were unfeelingly thrown out of sight."[76] These horrifying tales of infanticide and sexual immorality satiated a Protestant appetite for Anti-Catholic literature, and although they appeared after the riot, they demonstrate the intensity of Catholic prejudice in America.

As a best seller, Awful Disclosures had several powerful backers. One of these supporters of the Monk tales was Samuel Morse, the powerful Protestant preacher. So enthralled was Morse that he was appointed to a four man committee in 1837 to visit the Hotel Dieu Nunnery and investigate. With their increasing presence in American life, newspapers played a key role in advertising Awful Disclosures, and, as McCarthy points out, "it was the press which made this into a city-wide (and eventually national) story."[77] With the press providing the wind for their sails, nativists would use the story of Maria Monk to separate the Catholic Church from the "moral norms" of Protestant American society.

McCarthy has described the phenomenon of these convent tales as an attempt on the part of men to assert their masculinity. In American society, she argues, it was necessary for men to save naï ve Protestant girls from the wrath of an evil and oppressive Catholic Church. But rather than being an assertion of masculinity, the convent riot served to demonstrate the lack of identity from which Americans were suffering. Unable to define what it was to be an American, they resorted to defining themselves by whom they were not. Considering the men who sponsored the publication of these books, Awful

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[75] Maria Monk, Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery, (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1962), p. 54.
[76] Monk, Awful Disclosures, p. 196.
[77] McCarthy, The Rescue of True Womanhood, p. 257.

Disclosures and Six Months were rather attempts to justify the actions of the mob in Charlestown. Since the usual resentment of Catholics was clearly not enough to rationalize the burning of the convent (as the Fanueil Hall Committee demonstrated), it was necessary to further demonize the Catholic Church. The men behind the publication used the outrageous tales in Monk and Reed's stories to further separate the Church from not only American, but basic human values. This effort sought to place the Church and its followers outside the definition of an American, and mold a national identity through the alienation from a "foreign" religion.

Conclusion

In 1836, on the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Americans still did not have a consensus as to for what exactly they represented. Catholics, although still a relatively small minority, were increasing their presence in cities such as Boston, causing increasing antagonism from Protestants who saw the growing sect as a threat to their religious identity. Economically, manufacturing was maturing, causing displacement of thousands of guild and craft workers whose skills were becoming increasingly unprofitable. And foreigners flocking to the United States, while still not as great as later migrations, nevertheless raised questions as to the ethnic identity of the nation. Irish were seen as particularly dangerous, due to their almost comical ignorance of the tenants of democracy. This perception of the Irish led to the conclusion that they were a threat to the stability of the new republic.

Historians have dissected the causes for the Ursuline Convent riot of 1834 in numerous fashions. Some, such as Oscar Handlin, tend to emphasize the economic reasons for the riot, others the ethnic and religious overtones. Sexuality and its role have been thoroughly examined by Maureen McCarthy and Daniel A. Cohen. Yet few have attempted to tie all of these seemingly divergent causes under one theme. While the reasoning of these historians is often solid and well researched, they tend to emphasize one reason more strenuously than others. Clearly, some of the causes were more influential than others, but taken together, they all demonstrate that Americans were unsure of themselves.

This "identity crisis" led many discontented Americans on a search for who they were. The nation, even at this early stage, was both vast and extremely diverse. As Americans would later discover, much to their chagrin, two separate societies were forming in the North and the South. Without a state religion, the nation lacked any concrete religious identity, and the growing numbers of Catholics reflected this religious confusion. The economy under which their fathers and mothers had prospered was changing, and although industrialization would prove more efficient, it displaced workers who had relied on their skills and crafts to make a living. Unable to identify exactly who they were, native-born Americans lashed out against those whom they categorized as definitely non-American.

Few institutions offered a better target than the Ursuline Convent on Mount Benedict. The massive stone building, topped with a massive Catholic cross, overlooked the famous Bunker Hill battlefield, where many of the United States' first heroes were killed. Spurred on by hateful literature and virulent anti-Catholic speeches, the men who

ransacked and burned the helpless convent were driven by a hostility which represented the antithesis of their belief system. Unable to identify who they were, they attacked those whom they could easily identify as enemies of their values.

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